



Health, Nutrition & Organics

Blueberries, Tomatoes Bring More Than Color to the Plate

by Michele Bellue
Staff Writer

In 2005, Americans heard for the first time the marketing term "superfruit." Today, the exotic fruits like açai, pomegranate, noni and goji are gaining popularity, but there is a superfruit that is grown in the United States. It's the blueberry. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) expects the state to produce a good blueberry crop this year, available May 15 to Sept. 1. A third of the crop is processed and

sold frozen for the foodservice industry.

"Last year was a light crop due to the Easter freeze, so bushes grew vigorously and were able to produce abundant flower buds for the 2008 crop," said Laurie Wood, marketing specialist with the Southeast Marketing Center of the NCDA&CS. "If all continues as it currently looks, we expect for volumes to be much higher this season."

Although the blueberry always has been popular, the NCDA&CS says blueberry sales got a boost from being named to the antioxidant-rich superfruit list.

"Blueberry sales have definitely increased due to public awareness of health benefits associated with blueberry consumption. The N.C. Blueberry promotional program is a joint effort between the N.C. Blueberries by the N.C. Blueberry Council and the NCDA&CS," Wood told *Sunbelt Foodservice*. "Since blueberries have continued to gain fame as a superfruit and research continues to show the high levels of antioxidants and other health benefits, the consumer is increasingly aware



of these superfruit qualities. I believe that this is the best marketing tool a commodity could ask for."

As Americans look to add healthy items to their plates, the blueberry, especially locally grown, is an easy addition.

"With the obesity problem and the food safety issues in the news lately consumers are looking more and more for healthy, safe food choices," Wood said. "This is a great tool to market 'local' produce as well as the fruits and vegetables proving to be the healthiest, best choices. The blueberry publicity has been good for sales."

Even with this year's promising crop, those hoping to get N.C. blueberries on their menu will have to place an order early.

"N.C. blueberries are available to all markets, but demand is high, so prior arrangements should be made with one of the several marketing organizations," Wood said.

Tasty tomatoes

Although not considered a superfruit, the tomato is antioxidant rich. And it comes in several varieties, like grape, cherry, roma and heirloom. Plant City, Fla.-based Santa Sweets offers these varieties and has the trademark on the UglyRipe™, a type of heirloom tomato. Santa Sweets™ also come in organic. As of November, the company began offering kosher-certified tomatoes.

"We already have a food safety and traceability program in place for all of our tomato products... so becoming certified kosher was a natural path to go to," Veronica Rivas, director of organics with Santa Sweets, told *Sunbelt Foodservice*. "We feel that a lot of Americans, regardless of faith, believe that kosher food is healthier and cleaner, so becoming certified kosher with our tomatoes and table grapes gives us a little bit more of a selling power beyond the Jewish community."

So how does a tomato company get a name like Santa Sweets?

"It's derived from the seed variety, which is a Santa F1—an original seed variety. We are the original grape tomato that was introduced into the United States," said Michael Lacey, who handles national foodservice sales at Santa Sweets. "The 'Sweets' is because our brix (natural sugar content) count is higher than all the other grape tomatoes on the market."

Santa Sweets' UglyRipe, a Maramondo tomato, also is available in organic and kosher.

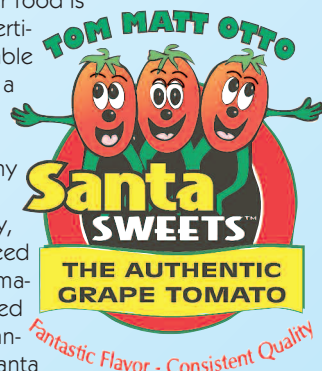
"It's not the prettiest tomato, but it's the best tasting tomato," said Lacey, who notes that Santa Sweets is one of the only U.S. tomato companies that handles the entire process of growing, packing and distributing its products.

As restaurants seek products that are traceable and organic, more diners could be eating tomatoes from the Santa Sweets fields—three each in Mexico and Florida and one each in North Carolina and New Jersey.

"We're getting a lot of requests from restaurants that are wanting to put organic products onto their menu. With the big 'green' movement right now, it's really a thing for people to show organic products on their menu," Lacey told *Sunbelt Foodservice*.

Tracing the products from "field to fork" is a quality that restaurants like to see, Lacey said.

"Each of the packages—the grape tomatoes—are marked with a code that would identify field, pack, production, production date, location where it was packed," Lacey said. "We can do that at the foodservice level and at the retail level. We're the only tomato company that does that."





NORTH CAROLINA BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL

What: The fifth annual event held in Pender County includes 100-plus vendors, children's events, recipe contests, a golf tournament, 5K run/walk, entertainment and more. About 25,000 people attended last year's event.

Where: Historic downtown Burgaw, N.C.

When: June 20-21

Blueberry facts: Highbush blueberries account for about 75 percent of the state's crop and rabbiteyes about 25 percent. Both types of blueberry are sold fresh and frozen.

Websites: www.ncblueberryfestival.com or www.gottobenc.com.

POLLO TROPICAL'S FLORIDA MENU NOW HORMONE-FREE

Pollo Tropical Restaurants® has transitioned its entire menu in Florida to be hormone-free. The company became trans fat free Nov. 1. The announcement comes in conjunction with the March 24 launch of new steak fajitas and picadillo.

"This move in Florida further emphasizes our commitment to natural ingredients, and our promise to serve the most flavorful and healthy food among all quick-service restaurants," said Jim Tunnessen, COO.

Miami-based Pollo Tropical's Latin/Caribbean menu is centered on flame-grilled, 24-hour citrus marinated "Chicken on the Grill." Other choices include Caribbean ribs, steak skewers, sweet plantains, yuca, black beans and rice.

The company opened a restaurant in Plant City, Fla., on March 28, its fourth in the greater Tampa Bay area. In addition to Florida, the company has stores in New Jersey, Puerto Rico and Ecuador.

"Plant City is experiencing significant growth," said Kim Miller, senior marketing director for Pollo Tropical. "We are honored to contribute to the progress of this rich community."

AEROPONIC FARM GROWING 'IN THIN AIR'

Frederick, Colo.-based Grow Anywhere is the first commercial aeroponic farm in the nation. The microgreens, specialty mixes and shoots produced by Grow Anywhere—available for local restaurants year-round—are grown in thin air, literally. No medium, such as soil or water, is required, and all foreign materials are removed. The plants grow through a combination of air and nutrients, and they hold up well on hot entrees and on the shelf, the company says.

Grow Anywhere is directly supported by a NASA-funded researcher. The highly controlled atmosphere allows plants to grow in 100 percent organic, pesticide-free conditions. www.grow-anywhere.com; (303) 776-1611.

MEMPHIS RESTAURANTS, CLINIC WORK ON NUTRITIOUS MENUS

Memphis Heart Clinic's Heart Builders program partnered with the Memphis Restaurant



Introducing Fully Cooked NaturaSelect™ Organic & Natural Meat Toppings

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Seasoned Ground Beef

Natural

Italian Sausage

Seasoned Ground Beef

Canadian Bacon

Pepperoni

Convenient fully cooked toppings make it easy for you to offer organic or natural menu items that are highly in demand.

"Clean label" with a short list of easy to read ingredients.

Organic products use only USDA organic certified or approved ingredients.

Natural products have no artificial ingredients added.

Individually quick frozen to maintain freshness and shelf-life.



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